

Head to head with Hadrian

Caroline Vout

The British Museum has mounted a major exhibition devoted to the man who built the Wall. But what sort of an emperor was this man, also renowned for his travels, his boy-friend, and his love of art? Carrie Vout investigates what artists have made of him and what we might make of him.

Hitting the headlines

Even before the opening of its current exhibition, *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict*, the British Museum was giving Hadrian maximum exposure. One of the key exhibits from its own collection, a spectacular bronze head of the emperor which had been fished out of the Thames in 1834, was winging its way from Bloomsbury to Northumbria. Stopping first at Carlisle's Tullie House and then Segedunum Roman Fort in Wallsend, Hadrian could be brought up to speed with the fate of 'the Roman wall', one of his most famous legacies.

Sporting his usual short beard and carefully curled hair, Hadrian stares across millennia. Originally the head would have been part of a colossal statue, presumably in a forum in London – the human face of 'Roman rule', a hotline between Britain and the rest of the empire. It mattered little perhaps that few had caught a glimpse of him when he visited the island in A.D. 122. For how could one man match the majesty of this bronzed beauty, and the hopes and fears that it evoked? To most people, this was Hadrian. So much so, that some may have been incited to damage the statue, just as centuries later people pulled the images of Stalin and Saddam off their pedestals (see p. 4 above). What better way to pour cold water on Britain's relationship with Rome than to cut it off at the head, and throw that head into the river?

We cannot know for certain how it ended up in the sludge. But its rediscovery has us think, as the ancients were made to think, about the man behind the mask and how to relate to him. Is he good or bad? Cultured or warmongering? Divine or human? For an emperor who was famed for travelling more than any other, it was especially rewarding to see him on the move again.

Head and shoulders above the rest

At the same time as this Hadrian was being taken on his latter-day tour, London's National Gallery fielded an exhibition of paintings by Italian artist, Pompeo Batoni (1708–87). Most visitors were there to see his 'Grand Tour' pieces, mighty canvases which elevate English aristocrats by associating them with classical culture – like Charles Crowle (above), who leans for legitimation against a desk on which are not only books, an inkwell, map, and a globe, but also miniature versions of two of Rome's best known sculptures, the Farnese *Hercules* and the Vatican *Cleopatra* or *Ariadne* (called Cleo from the snake bracelet around her upper arm). Such was the cachet of these antiquities in the eighteenth century that their presence is as important to his status as his dog and velvet breeches.

But it is a rather different kind of canvas that attracts us here: one of Batoni's earlier paintings, *Allegory of the Arts* of 1740, now in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt. Five fleshy females vie for our attention: standing on the right is Poetry, her identity advertised by the lyre in her hand and the volumes of Homer and Vergil at her feet. Music is behind her with twin flutes, and further back still, at the apex of the composition, a figure usually assumed to be Architecture. Painting takes centre stage, more earthy somehow than the overtly classicizing Poetry, yet in dialogue with her nonetheless, as she adds the finishing brush strokes to an image of Mercury, god of eloquence. Seated in the foreground and clasping her hand is Sculpture, a tinted version of the neoclassical nudes which she inspires. In her hand is a hammer and on the floor to the left of her, a drill and chisel. The piece that she has been working on is a head of Hadrian.

It is curious to see something so recognisable, positioned so deliberately casually at the corner of the canvas. Hadrian is a marble version of the kind of portrait head that turned up in the Thames, blank, white, and yet strangely animate, as though

tickled by the silk skirts of his maker. His features are as iconic as the Homer and Vergil across from him. All epitomize the high points of Greco-Roman production.

There is nothing arbitrary about Hadrian's inclusion here. As Roman emperors go, he was amongst the most cultured, an enthusiast for Latin and Greek literature, geometry, and architecture, who painted, played the flute, and wrote his own poetry. He also collected art. His famed sophistication combines with the many statues that were being discovered in the eighteenth-century excavations of his villa at Tivoli to give him a status akin to a modern day 'collector' of classical sculpture. Pieces found there became especially prized amongst the aristocrats that Batoni was painting (as the canvas from the Metropolitan Museum, below, shows, where an unknown aristocrat gestures towards the relief of Antinous from Tivoli which was displayed from 1763 in the newly built Villa Albani in Rome). The owner of this villa, Alessandro Albani, even commissioned a fresco for the wall to the left of the relief showing Hadrian and Antinous walking through Tivoli, plans in hand, as it was taking shape around them. The image of the villa's construction in antiquity reminded the viewer of its ruined state today, as well as of Albani's own villa, which had been purpose-built for this collection. It underlined the relationship between present and past and equated him and the emperor.

Hadrian owes his inclusion in Batoni's painting to this growing status as patron of the arts. The art-historian Winckelmann, who worked for Albani, mused in the first edition of his famous *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* or *History of the Art of Antiquity*, that 'if it had been possible to restore to art its former glory, then Hadrian was the man who lacked neither the knowledge nor the effort'. It is figures like him that turn Greek statuary into 'Art' as we know it. He lends the arts in the eighteenth century an imperial seal of approval.

Head of state

But what was the real Hadrian like? How was he received not in the eighteenth century but when he visited Britain back in A.D. 122? A penetrating answer is

provided by Victorian artist, Lawrence Alma-Tadema's painting, *Hadrian in England: Visiting a Romano-British Pottery*, of 1884, a large canvas which he divided and adjusted after its initial exhibition. Today the sections are in different museums. They share the reds and ochres that often colour Alma-Tadema's domestic scenes but omit the shining marble with which he usually signals ancient opulence. The inscription in honour of Hadrian is scratched in wood rather than engraved in stone. Mercury makes an appearance here too on the only visible column in the background, but as the god of trade this time rather than eloquence. There are parts of the empire and parts of the empire. And this is Romano-Britain, not Rome or Naples.

Hadrian dominates the canvas, his height and width further enhanced by the niche that frames him. While his wife, Sabina, makes polite conversation on his right, carrying the obligatory bouquet which marks a queenly visit, Hadrian appears uncomfortable – somehow absent despite his presence. He is not of this world, the paper in his hand more reminiscent of an official decree than a shopping list. The seller is attentive and nervous. He, and we, seem to be witnessing the arrival of a god – an epiphany. Either that, or a statue. Hadrian stares impassively into the distance, as if unconscious of the seller's overtures. The paleness of his features works with the horizontal axis of the shelf behind to separate his head from his torso. The result is striking: it is as though one of the marble busts of the emperor with which we are so familiar were nestling there among the pottery, complete with its original paintwork.

Head collector

Here too, Hadrian is imaged as collector, but not of fine art but provincial pottery. Souvenirs. He is amassing artefacts of empire, as he might slaves or provinces. In this setting, it is he that is the artwork. The presence of the staircase in the foreground forces us to look up at him – approach him even, in the hope that he will meet us half way. Before the painting was divided, the potter on the Paris panel came up these same stairs, pausing with a tray of new items. He knows better than to look at Hadrian. The bareness of his torso contrasts with the sumptuous robes of Hadrian and the Roman women to highlight that he is a worker. And a Briton. His bracelet suggests that he might also be a slave. Certainly, his extraordinary similarity to the other potters in the painting stresses that he is one of a clan. By implication, so are we, no matter how much we might aspire to be otherwise. As we share his ground level and potential viewpoint, our sense of localness swells within us.

Whatever we produce, this emperor will gobble up. Are we so admiring that we will sell our souls to him?

For us, as for most of those who lived in the Roman Empire, Hadrian is his image. It is his image that raises these questions. His portraits mesh with the literary evidence that survives to give us quite an insight into the real man. But one which is made more powerful by what it allows us to imagine. Batoni and Alma-Tadema both offer us invitations to see ourselves in Hadrian. But for Alma-Tadema, this is complicated by the realization that Hadrian is a Roman emperor, and we are as related, if not more related, to the potters. Is this what imperialism feels like? And if so, what do we really think about Hadrian's Wall? Answers can be found at the British Museum. There you can yourself go head to head with Hadrian.

Carrie Vout teaches Classics at Cambridge University. Her own exhibition of images of Hadrian's boy-friend Antinous was shown at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds in 2006 and its catalogue, Antinous: the Face of the Antique, won the 2007 The Art Book award. A longer version of this piece was published in the summer issue of Apollo.